

Chapter Fourteen -- Pickin' Cotton

Of all the jobs we ran into as we wandered farther south, the nicest by far was cotton pickin'. It's one job a feller can tailor just to suit his own measure, an' it will always fit. You can pick by yourself an' chew the cud of your thoughts, or you can pick with one or two others or a crowd, an' have a good time.

Talkin' or singin' don't bother at all unless you're like the steamboat Father used to tell about. Sometimes he'd say: "George, you remind me of the steamboat that had a six-foot boiler an' a seven-foot whistle. Every time it whistled, it stopped." I believe he said Abe Lincoln was the first one to tell the story, so far as he knew.

When we made a little crop of corn for meal an' for our pigs -- which we did a good many summers -- Father liked for us to work right along hoein', or thinnin', or whatever we might have on hand. Though he never was like Sam Worley, who used to tell his boys:

"Boys, if we don't get more work done there's goin' to be an aaaaass-beatin' around here, an' you'uns 'll have the aaaaass to furnish."

When we chopped cotton (that means thinnin' it out) or bunched it (which means cuttin' out grass bunches missed by the last plowin') we had to work right along, for we got paid by the day, an' if we were too slow we wouldn't get any more work. When we stripped cane bottoms we had to keep up with the men who stripped

the blades off the upper part of the stalk, or get laughed at.

If we got a job runnin' the suction pipe at the gin, we had to keep the cotton movin', or the gins'd get empty, an' we'd hear Uncle Sieb Christopher (who was a great Sunday School man, an' didn't cuss) wailin': "By bloods, bullies! Gimme steady work!"

But when you pick cotton, you get paid by the pound, an' if you don't feel like pickin' hard, you just take it easy. Black an' white, men an' women, boys an' girls, can all pick together in perfect equality, except that some of the fast pickers can carry two rows (that means pick off a row on each side of them) an' keep ahead of the slow ones that were pickin' just one.

We didn't use the long, draggin' sack that they use out in the Mississippi Valley, when I used to pick down in Georgia. We picked into a sack that hung over your shoulder and cleared the ground when you stood up. But when your shoulder got tired you could get down on your knees, an' it'd drag. When the cotton sack was crammed full you had around twelve or fifteen pounds, which doesn't sound like much till you try it. Each one of us had a big woven split basket that would hold around eighty or a hundred pounds, an' we'd empty our bags into it. Fast pickers would have two baskets or more.

If there were plenty of baskets, the farmer would weigh up once a day, but he might weigh about noon if he needed to empty them. Generally, though, he'd start to weigh up about an hour by sun, (that means an hour before sundown) so as to be through by dark. He'd drive the wagon down into the field, an' weigh up your basket with steelyards, an' then empty it an' weigh it again.

He'd put down your weight in a book, an' you'd get paid maybe once a week.

The price of pickin' ran from forty cents to a dollar a hundred, accordin' to the price of cotton, an' how hard it was to get pickers. The most I ever picked in a day was under a hundred an' sixty pounds, but lots of people could pick over three hundred. An' there were a few that could pick five hundred. That's about a third of a bale, for it takes around sixteen hundred pounds of seed cotton to gin out a five hundred pound bale of lint. There were stories of men and their wives, or brothers, that could pick a bale a day between them, from daylight till dark. But I think it was just talk, for they were always away off somewhere. The most I ever saw picked was John Bostwick's four eighty, and he quit an hour by sun to weigh up.

The nicest pickin' we ever did was for Judge Norvell, whose daughter, Puddin', was the belle of Bishop, Georgia. He had big, broad, fields, an' if a dozen of us were workin' we could take a row apiece an' pick along together all day.

When we heard he was ready to pick, Walter an' I went up to his house, an' found him out in the big back yard, by the well.

"Well, boys," he said. "What's your wish, if you had it fried?"

We told him,

"I'm payin' a dollar a hundred," he told us. "Come on out Saturdays or after school any time you've a mind to, but pick it out clean. I can't make no money leavin' cotton in the bolls an' on the ground."

School let out at two thirty in the fall, an' that gave us a long time to pick till supper time. I still remember the crowd that picked for the Judge.

We picked with Jim an' Ed Smith (their father, Wimp Smith, was a cotton buyer); and Spuer O'Dillon (I can't remember his first name. We called him Spuer because he loved to step on may-pops, or "spuers", the fruit of the passion flower, which pops with a spue!); an' Pig Gillen; an' there was Lonnie Covington, a hunchback whose father was a blacksmith, an' who helped around the forge. His skin was dark, an' often grimy, too, from the soot. Then Henry Grady Hopkins, the Judge's Negro wages-hand, picked with us whenever there wasn't anything else for him to do. He could really pick cotton, too. Once in a while Mrs. Smith would pick for an afternoon, though they didn't need the money, just so as not to forget how.

Ed called her "Miz Smith" instead of "mama", but then Ed was a funny feller, anyway. One day he remarked that "Lonnie isn't a blacksmith; he's a black Covington." And from then on, Lonnie's name was "the Black Covington." He never seemed to mind. The rest of us boys called one another "ye villain", from reading such books as "Young Wild West and the Branded Band, or The Scourge of Skeleton Skit", and "Young Wild West's Leap in the Dark, or Arietta and the Underground Stream." Somehow, though, the Black Covington, who said it "Villyum", got the idea it was my nickname, and always used it to me.

Once, for instance, I was feelin' gay because my row had some skips in it, where the cotton hadn't come up. I was always lazy, an' when I got to a skip I could keep up with the rest without workin'.

"Villyum," the Black Covington told me, "the Jedge don't pay much for them skips."

Mostly, we didn't try to work too hard anyway, an' when Henry Grady was with us he could carry two rows an' still have time to sing, an' tell stories along with the rest.

You don't sing work songs while you pick cotton. They're to keep time to on a job like breakin' rock, or rollin' cotton bales. For the cotton field we sang songs like "Uncle Bud".

"Uncle Bud" has about a thousand verses, an' most of 'em wouldn't do to print. A verse would run like:

Big cat, little cat, playin' in the san';

Big cat growled like a full grown man.

Uncle Bannunaud.

Only the cat didn't growl. Of all the verses we knew, I can't remember a single one that I can use here without cleanin' it up, except:

Beef steak, beef steak, fried in lard;

White folks talkin' 'bout the times bein' hard.

Uncle Bannunaud.

Part of the verses were about the exploits of Uncle Bud, who had and did just about everything. And many had no connection with Uncle Bud except the refrain. But it was an ideal song to sing out in the field, with a sharp, barking sound, and verses short enough not to interrupt work.

We sang, too, songs like "I Went Down to My Girl's House", an' a moanin' one with the refrain: "It's all night long." Or we recited rigmaroles like the half-song about how:

Ol' Aunt Sis,

She went out to pillick up some chips.

and the rest of her adventures in similar vein.

But mostly we told stories. Some were about people we knew, or about impossible feats of cotton pickin'. The boll weevil was new in Georgia then, an' there were lots of songs an' stories about it.

"Say, fellows," Ed would say. "Did you hear about that boll weevil drivin' a automobile?" Then he'd tell it:

I was over at Watkinsville, the other day, an' goin' down the street I saw a great big bunch of men tryin' to crank up an ol' Flanders car. I stopped to watch 'em.

They cranked, an' cranked, an' couldn't get it started, an' at last they decided they'd have to prime it.

Finally they raised up the hood, an' there was a GREAT BIG boll weevil, sittin' in under there.

The man that owned the car, he took a good look at that boll weevil, an' he said: "Look here, now, what you doin' in my car?"

"I'm go'n' to drive it," says the boll weevil.

"Why," the feller says, "you can't drive no automobile."

"The Hell I can't," says the boll weevil. "I bet yuh I'll drive fifty thousand of 'em into the shed before I get through with this cotton crop."

"Well," came in Pig Gillen who was dish-faced, just like a Berkshire hog. "You know how they been mixin' the poison with

sorghum to make it stick on the plants?"

We all knew about it, so he went on with the story:

Over here clost to County Line the other day there was a farmer that had poisoned his cotton one day, an' the next night he heered an awful racket outside.

Pretty soon he heered somethin' poundin' on his door.

He was kind of skeered, but he got out of bed an' went to the door, an' opened it a little bitty crack an' peeped out. There was a whole passel of boll weevils standin' out on the gallery.

"Whad you want?" he asked 'em.

"Mister," says the head boll weevil, "we just come to tell you we want some butter to go with our syrup."

Spuer had a story about the county farm agent, who was an old man an' a little hard of hearin':

Down at the meetin' the other night they was talkin' about how to pick out a farm, an' finally Mr. Jim Hilly turned around towards Mr. Raiford an' asked:

"Mr. Raiford, what would you do if you had a good, rich farm, but it was all full of crab grass?"

"Hay?" says Mr. Raiford.

"Why you know crab grass ain't no good fer hay," says Mr. Hilly.

"Hay?" says Mr. Raiford again, puttin' his hand behind his ear.

Mr. Hilly seen that Mr. Raiford hadn't heard him, so he yells out: "I SAID WEAT WOULD YOU DO IF YOU HAD A GOOD, RICH FARM, BUT

IT WAS ALL FULL OF QUACK GRASS?"

"Oh," says Mr. Raiford. "Why, I'd sell the darn farm to some darn Yankee that didn't have sense enough to know crab grass when he seen it."

By then it would be the Black Covington's turn:

You know, boys, one time there was a man that had an ol' yellor tom cat, that had been around the place fer about twenty year, an' finally he decided it was time to get rid of him. So he tuck him, an' put him in a sack with a great big rock, an' went over an' throwed him into the Oconee River.

Well, he went back home an' set down on the steps; an' while he was a-settin' there he looked up, an' there was the cat comin' back with the sack in his mouth.

So, the man tuck him a hatchet, an' he tuck the ol' cat way off down into the swamp, an' cut his head off.

He went back home an' set down on the steps, an' first thing you know he looked up, an' there come the cat with its head in its mouth.

So the man, he set there an' studied a minute, an' then he said to that cat:

"Now, darn you, you've gone an' got me mad at you. Now I'm goin' to KILL you."

It was always a good day when we could get Henry Grady to join in the story telling. But once Ed Smith even out-did him.

Spuer, who was a little, skinny fellow, had told about how one time he toted five bushels of shot -- shouldered it an' toted

it -- an' mired up to his knees in a flint rock. An' Pig had told about the man that heard an awful loud noise out in his cotton patch; an' when he went out there to find out what was the matter, it was the ol' boll weevils whippin' the young uns, because they wouldn't carry two rows at oncet.

"One time," starts off Henry Grady, "I was travelin' aroun' an' first thing you know I was ten thousand miles away from home, an' I didn't have a cent to my name."

"Take your time, Henry Grady," says Ed, bringin' in an ol' joke we'd told on Henry Grady for a long time.

"I'm takin' my time," says Henry Grady with a grin.

"Anyway," he goes on, "there I was, ten thousand miles away from home, an' I was powerful' hungry.

"Well, it was sandy ground, an' I look down, an' there was a little bitty tater vine growin' there, 'bout as long as my han'. It didn' look like much, but I thought maybe it'd have a little bitty tater on the end of the root.

"So, I stooped down an' started grabblin' down under the root, an' sure enough, there was a little tater down there, just like I thought."

"Take your time, Henry Grady," says Ed again, an' Henry Grady grinned.

"I'm takin' my time," he says, an' took a new hold on his story.

"Well," he says, "I thought I'd grabble down under that little tater, an' so I reached down, but it kept gettin' bigger, the farther I went. So I dug a little farther round, so's I could dig it out.

"The further I dug down the bigger it kept gettin'. So I went an' got me a shovel, an' started diggin'. But that little tater kep' gettin' bigger.

"Then I went an' got me a crew of men with picks an' shovels, an' they dug, an' the further we dug, the bigger it got. So finally I got me some steam shovels an' started diggin' down around it, an' then I got a saw mill, an' started sawin' planks out of that tater an' sellin' it.

"We dug out that whole tater, an' sawed it up. An' do you know, when we got back to the other end of that tater, I was right at home."

We all laughed, an' then Ed started:

"One day I was goin' along, an' I saw a great big lot of men diggin' down in the ground, an' buildin' something.

"I went up to see what it was, an' they was makin' a great big pot, so big they had to make it down into the ground, because they couldn't get high enough up to build it on top of the ground.

"That pot was so deep that one of the men dropped his hammer into it just when he was quittin' work on Saturday night. An' just when he got back to work Monday mornin' he heard it hit the bottom.

"Well, I went up to the foreman, an' asked: 'What in the world are you-all buildin' that great, big ol' pot for?'

"'Why don't you know?' he asks me. 'We're buildin' this pot to cook Henry Grady's potato in.'"